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ABSTRACT

The University of Tennessee has integrated computer technology into its business report and letter writing course, an 11-week course required of all business administration undergraduates. Basic principles of management and introduction to computer courses are prerequisites. Early course content emphasizes foundations of report writing, the writing of sample information reports in memo format, and a more complex report involving decision making from alternatives. The last half of the course emphasizes the writing of an analytical report in formal style involving tables, graphic figures, and interpretations. This report is usually an original project in which students participate in data collection as well as in report writing. The course consists of lecture and lab sessions during which students compose their reports on microcomputers using software that involves text processing, spreadsheets, and graphics. After completing the course, students often return to the open labs and use the computer terminals for writing other papers, a sign that they have found a valuable writing tool and that the effort to integrate computer technology into business classes has been successful. (HTH)

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# INTEGRATING COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSES: BUSINESS REPORTS AND LETTERS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the experience of integrating microcomputers into the business communication courses at The University of Tennessee. Results from the experience have been highly satisfactory.

## INTRODUCTION

During the past three years, I have been involved with integrating computer technology into our business report writing and letter writing courses at The University of Tennessee. My remarks are directed toward the major considerations in this undertaking. Because of the time constraint, I will use the Business Report Writing course as the basis for explanation--similar comments could also be made about Business Letter Writing.

In our new curriculum at The University of Tennessee, a course, entitled Business Communications: Reports, is required. Therefore, we wanted to be able to handle the number of students coming into the course and still to maintain quality writing experiences. In addition, we felt that use of the desk-top computer was a valuable experience which students (as future business people) could profit from if integrated into the communication courses. That was, and still is, the basic objective of this effort.

In this paper, I want to summarize the course description, course structure, and grading scheme, and end with some general comments about this effort.

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Business Communications: Reports is an 11-week course (quarter system) required for all undergraduate students in the College of Business Administration. The course has been designed to be taken in the latter part of the sophomore year or early junior year--basic principles of management and introduction to computer courses are prerequisites.

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The course content is structured from a simple to complex writing concept. Early course content emphasizes foundations of report writing; then the writing of sample informing reports in memo format is begun; after these simpler reports, a more complex report involving decision from alternatives is applied--resulting in a recommendation. The last half of the course emphasizes the writing of an analytical report in formal style involving tables, graphic figures, and interpretations. The analytical report is usually an original project in which students participate in data collection as well as in writing the report.

For example, during the Winter 1984 quarter, the analytical report project involved surveying hotels and motels in the Knoxville area to ascertain the availability of facilities for professional groups to have regular monthly meetings and seminars. The project involved the planning of the project, writing of a questionnaire, collection of data from hotels/motels, analysis of the data, and preparation of a written report. The students reacted very favorably to this type of project. During the Spring 1984 quarter we collected information about individual retirement accounts (IRA) from the various businesses offering this type of retirement plan. Our objective will be to find the best place to invest in an IRA.

Other appropriate cases are used during the quarter in building a simple-to-complex understanding of writing a report.

## CLASS STRUCTURE

The Business Communications: Reports course consists of two basic parts--the lecture and the lab.

### Lecture Sessions

Students--about 90 of them--meet as a large "lecture" group on Mondays and Wednesdays for a regular class period under my direction. In these sessions, various activities are included such as distribution and explanation of course syllabus, explanation of the relationship of the activities of the lecture and lab sessions, assignment of text and periodical readings, tests, announcements about any schedule changes, presentation of the report-writing concepts being studied, individual- and group-writing exercises, oral reporting, and presentations by guest speakers. Model reports, paragraphs, and other writing aids are distributed and discussed in these "lecture" sessions. Assigned homework exercises are compared with "model" answers with the aid of an overhead projector; this method of immediate feedback has been very beneficial to the students. The major focus of the "lecture" part of the course is to prepare the students for the actual writing of report cases during the lab sessions.

### Lab Sessions

Each student is assigned to a 2-hour laboratory each week under the direction of a graduate teaching assistant, with about 15 students

per lab. Business-related cases are used for these lab sessions--approximately 8-10 cases are completed during the quarter depending on the complexity of these cases. Several sessions are devoted to the writing of the quarter project. Students prepare a planning sheet as the basis for composing their reports at the CRT terminals.

The lab consists of 17 stand-alone Xerox 820-II microcomputers, two quality printers, and two dot-matrix printers. Most students enter the course without any experience in operating a desk-top computer. Therefore, the first lab session concentrates on making the students comfortable with the desk-top computer. A simplistic approach has been developed whereby students learn only the basic tasks for hardware and software operation: turning on the hardware; loading the software; following the menu options; naming a file; inputting a message; editing and making copy changes; storing the completed message on a floppy disk; and printing the message. After this initial introduction, students are given a handout that gives a step-by-step reference for future use. This approach has been very effective for the students.

After the first lab session, students are given a set of cases; they are to read and plan the case before going to the lab. From this plan sheet, students compose their messages at the computer terminal. A graduate teaching assistant gives preliminary instructions and then checks with students during the lab session to give immediate feedback as to the quality of the writing. After a student turns in his/her report(s), the graduate teaching assistant evaluates the quality of each--any case with less than a C quality must be revised later in order to receive credit; if not revised, then that case receives a zero. This procedure has also worked very well.

## GRADING STRUCTURE

During these three years, I have experimented with several different ways of arriving at a final grade. The following is the current structure:

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| Lecture Session Quizzes/Exercises | 30 percent |
| Lab Cases | 20 percent |
| Lab Tests (3) | 30 percent |
| Final Exam (Multiple-choice; Comprehensive) | 20 percent |

## CONCLUSION

Students have reacted positively to this approach of integrating computer technology into the business communication courses at UT-Knoxville. Even students who do not type by touch enjoy this approach to the business communication courses.

The software used in the course involves text processing, spreadsheet, and graphics. After completing the course, students return to our open labs and use the desk-top computer terminals for other papers--a sign that they have found a valuable tool in addition to learning to write better.

Two research studies have been conducted at UT-Knoxville involving the integration of computer technology in the business report writing and business letter writing courses. One study was completed by Sandra Price and the other by Mary Noblitt. The materials developed by these two individuals for use in the lab sessions are now being considered for publication by a major publisher.

Most of the effort has been positive. There have only been a few minor negative aspects of this project. For example, we found that some students completing a writing case would give the floppy disk to another student (very rare, I might add), thereby giving the second student a false sense of accomplishment. The lab assistants watch very carefully for this kind of activity. It is now very difficult for such plagiarism to occur.

The efforts to integrate computer technology into a business communication course are well worth the time and energy--comments back from students now in the business world make me glad I undertook the project!